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Sharing Data is Hard!—But Worth It

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publication more generally. We can anticipate a world in which all scholarly publications are fully open access, and in which each publication is expected to include hyperlinks to the open data sets on which it is based. We can also expect many of these services to be facilitated by business intermediaries, whether non-profit or for profit, raising a host of secondary, and ethical, issues both for archaeologists and for the institutions that hire them.

RESPONSE

Sharing Data is Hard!—But Worth It

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I developed one of those finish-the-sentence chants to teach my young son to share with other kids. “Sharing is . . .,” I say, raising my voice to prompt him, and he shouts “. . . good!” Of course, we all know that sharing is . . . hard! But willingly or not, sharing is the new ethic for a new century, one that archaeologists, regardless of age, must adapt to for so many reasons described in Kansa and Whitcher Kansa’s article. It is like preschool all over again for archaeologists, and our authors are those patient teachers urging us to share with each other. This time it is our most precious toys we must lend: our data.

But if data publication is to have a promising future, then advocates like Kansa and Whitcher Kansa must reflect deeply on the cultures of academic sharing. Sharing is cultural, after all, and like all culture, it is mostly learned, and hardly innate. The willingness to distribute the materials that make up the backstage of final publications—the gray literature, the spreadsheets, the images, the really-good-but-rejected grant application—is a habit that emerges through specific disciplinary formations, practices that are learned from mentors and peers early in one’s career.

So I believe our authors are still trying to decipher archaeology’s far from homogeneous attitudes toward sharing. Case in point is the way they mistakenly typecast their audience as academics pressured to manufacture only

traditional print-run publications in the highest ranked journals. Scholars supposedly have no time for projects like data sharing that bring little credit from university promotion committees. This is partly true, of course. But this type-cast scholar, a highly rational hamster, wheel-peddling her way to tenure, is somewhat of a straw man. Academics—like this author, who is writing an un-refereed response in the first issue of a fledgling journal—make contributions to knowledge that are rarely acknowledged in their promotion cases.

In order to get at the crux of this issue, one should not ask why archaeologists don’t share, but rather, why (and when) do they share? Any pretense of altruism should be discarded immediately; studies on sharing, cooperation, and collaboration demonstrate that when people give, they implicitly expect reciprocity, maybe not from the immediate receiver, but from some other source at a later time. Data is therefore a type of capital (*sensu* Bourdieu) that is displayed and exchanged in ways that boost the reputation of scholars and their projects. If one has BIG data sets, their display leaves admirers awe-struck and competitors envious. Or the discovery of a singularized datum that is reported in the media—an inscription or a monumental sculpture—boosts a scholar’s reputation in the public eye. Archaeologists obviously surrender their capital when it is strategically beneficial for them or their projects. But the calculated timing of such events is potentially revealing for data-sharing advocates. More research is needed to identify the co-occurring circumstances and pressures that give rise to these moments of sharing.

A few of my early mentors warned me not to share data before “final” publication. I remember us scrambling when a supposed adversary was visiting. Lock the door, hide the keys, deflect questions. I was told that if we hid the materials until the last possible minute, we could then retain control over its interpretation. That data is still not published (the adversary’s is). But now I do share, for so many reasons, beyond the fact that it earns me capital. I believe the authors are correct that sharing data in open-access platforms is a public good, especially for those working at public institutions or with public funding. I also share for practical reasons: my office in Berkeley sits above the Hayward Fault and when the Big One happens, all of my notes, books, and data may be buried under nine floors of office debris. It helps me sleep easier at night knowing

that not all will be lost. But I also share—and this is where the authors need to take note—because I want to prove to the world that I can dig up something old, label, photograph, and draw it, and then share it with the world very fast, proving that I am, indeed, an archaeologist, perhaps even a competent one. I can't be the only researcher out there with this anxiety to prove myself worthy, an anxiety that data-sharing gurus help to alleviate.

A final thought for our authors that returns to my earlier comment on data as capital: data-sharing needs to be cool, it has to be hip, it must be sexy. Data sharing needs to be so cool, in fact, that we can overhear somebody at conferences yelling, "What? I can't download the data for your paper?" Facebook and other social media websites have taught us that people share their information because they wish to feel like they belong to exclusive communities, real or imagined, physical or digital, of like-minded people. Rebranding data sharing as a practice in which only the highest caliber, most cutting-edge scholars are participating will attract a new generation of contributors. One may counter-argue with good reason that these changes would sacrifice the techy look needed to build trust with agencies like the NSF and NEH. But once a site has a good platform built (which many of them do), a professional reputation, and standard protocols, our authors need to consider the perennial need of contributors to feel like they belong to the coolest club in archaeology.

RESPONSE

Not an Either/Or Proposition: Combining Interpretive and Data Publication

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Overall, I find the analysis and arguments made in this paper compelling, so I am not going to waste my opportunity to comment on a critique. I would instead like to expand a bit on two particular elements of the analysis.

First, I would like to develop a bit more the potential for synergy between formal publication as it currently exists in the field of archaeology (journal articles and books) and data publication, mentioned almost in passing. Eric Kansa and Sarah Whitcher Kansa discuss data publication and the various imperatives driving data publication, but a scholar does not necessarily have to choose between publishing her data and publishing her interpretive work. During research conducted for the Archaeology of the Americas Digital Monograph Initiative—an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded collaborative planning grant involving Texas A&M University Press, University of Alabama Press, University of Arizona Press, University Press of Florida, and University of Utah Press as well as University Press of Colorado—a few things became clear from our conversations with archaeologists. First of all, archaeologists have mountains of unpublished data, as the authors of this paper also describe. Second, although the tenure and promotion system may not yet recognize such publication, archaeologists are eager to find ways to publish these data sets. Third, these data sets need to be productively tied to the article and book publications that present the arguments, interpretations, and conclusions drawn from the data.

This last point is critical. Would you rather click on a hyperlink in a journal article or book and be directed to the supporting data in raw form on a website maintained by the author, or would you prefer to be directed to a site where the data has been curated, cleaned up, and refined? Yes, it is important to see the data underlying the arguments, but you want the relevant data, not all of it, and you want it to be as easy to understand and follow as the interpretive work that you left behind in order to review that data. I can also tell you that the publishers who produce the formal publications in archaeology almost certainly do not have the staff expertise, the software, or the time to become data publishers. Although one skill set overlaps (managing the peer review process), the type of expertise required by an Open Context or a Digital Antiquity is quite different from that required at the University Press of Colorado. This is all the more reason for the existence of an Open Context to do this sort of work. Once an archaeologist's data is published, it could then be productively linked to any and all of the formal